

UNITED STATES
NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20555-0001

June 30, 1999

The Honorable Edward Markey
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman Markey:

As you know, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) is making a significant change to its process for overseeing the safety performance of commercial nuclear power plants. I would like to provide you with information regarding our new initiatives. The impetus behind this comprehensive change comes from the NRC's own reviews of its regulatory processes as part of "reinventing government" initiatives and comments received from Congressional committees, public interest groups, state regulators, the industry, and other external stakeholders.

The new process will apply more objective and safety-focused criteria in assessing plant performance and takes into consideration the substantial overall improvements in the performance of the nuclear industry, especially over the past ten years. These improvements are reflected, in part, by reductions in the number of events that require the operation of automatic safety equipment, the number of power plant outages caused by equipment problems, and improvements in equipment reliability. With improved plant performance, the NRC has identified the opportunity to improve its regulatory oversight of licensees in order to enhance its ability to distinguish plant performance in a predictable, objective, and risk-informed manner, thus improving the agency safety-focus. The new program will also serve to integrate the agency's inspection, assessment, and enforcement processes.

Through the revised reactor safety oversight program the NRC will:

1. focus its actions on those activities of greatest safety significance;
2. place greater regulatory attention on licensees with performance problems and reduce regulatory attention on facilities that perform acceptably;
3. implement objective performance measurements which are based upon research and operating experience;
4. provide stakeholders, the public and licensees timely and understandable assessment of plant performance;
5. respond to regulatory violations in a predictable and consistent manner that reflects the safety impact of the violation;
6. provide a more effective and efficient approach to maintaining safety.

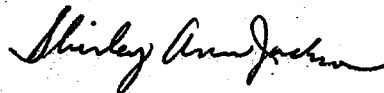
The new reactor oversight process will enhance the ability of the agency and licensees to focus on safety-significant issues to ensure they are corrected before more substantial safety performance problems result. The process will provide access to clear, understandable plant performance data as well as clearly defined thresholds which will result in regulatory action. The new oversight process will provide the NRC, as well as its stakeholders and the public, with more timely and objective data, helping them make better decisions and assuring more safety-focused regulation designed to protect the public health and safety. Plant performance and inspection data will be updated quarterly and made available to the public on the NRC's external Web site as well as in the Public Document Room. Finally, the new process clearly defines the degree and extent of regulatory action.

The new oversight process is currently being tested at nine plants as part of a pilot program that began in June 1999. The results of the pilot program will be evaluated and the revised reactor oversight process will be modified to reflect lessons learned.

In an effort to include stakeholder concerns in the development of our new initiative we enlisted public participation at each stage of the change process. State regulators, public interest groups, and the industry continue to participate in public meetings and workshops to help define our new process. Representatives from these groups will be part of a pilot program oversight evaluation advisory panel, which is integral to the assessment of the new program. We are holding public meetings in the vicinity of each pilot program site in order to inform local stakeholders and to gain their insights. State regulators have been invited to and have attended inspector training sessions on the new process. In fact, in the future, we anticipate more frequent public meetings and more frequent public communication as a result of implementing the new oversight process.

We have enclosed a copy of our publication, "New NRC Reactor Inspection and Oversight Program (NUREG-1649, Rev. 1)," which briefly discusses the new process. We hope this publication will help you in gaining a better understanding of this new initiative. The NRC staff is available to meet with you or your staff to provide additional information on the revised reactor oversight process and other initiatives we have under development.

Sincerely,



Shirley Ann Jackson

Enclosure: As stated

[Attachments are on file in Representative Markey's office or are available on the NRC website at www.nrc.gov.]